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ABSTRACT

The two papers presented here reflect on experiences involved in founding and participating in La Compania de Teatro Bilingue, a bilingual theater group at a Texas university that recognizes the commonality of the Mexican-American and Anglo heritages in South Texas. The first paper discusses the need for such a group, explains its goal of including Mexican-Americans in a concept of community, and tells how the group differs from the politically-oriented Teatro Chicano. It also explains the group's orientation toward Latin American dramatic literature; its search for new forms of expression; its experimentations with bilingual theater for children, the story theater form, and the use of multimedia; and the benefits to the actors of working in two languages and of experiencing new cultural exposures. The second paper discusses factors that have contributed to Mexican-American actors' feelings of inferiority in the theater and to a lack of theatrical opportunities for them; and it tells the positive results La Compania de Teatro Bilingue has had in improving the standing and image of Mexican-American actors. It also discusses the presentation of plays dealing with social conditions meaningful to Mexican-Americans and other non-Anglo publics and notes the success of bilingual theater for children. (GT)

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TEATRO BILINGUE: PERSPECTIVES AND HORIZONS

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TEATRO BILINGUE: PERSPECTIVES AND HORIZONS

Since it was formed, seven years ago. La Compañía de Teatro Bilingue has had to spend a good deal of time overcoming misconceptions about its identity. The confusions seem to fall into two broad categories. The first of these, commonly held in Mexico, but not solely in Mexico, is that Texas has only one university, the University of Texas in Austin. We have often been programmed as coming from the University of Texas, an institution which, for all its size, cannot seem to support a bilingual theatre group in the drama department. It has been conjectured why the university does not have such a group, and some suppose it is because that university, at least in the area of theatre, has immunized itself against Mexican American influences. Be that as it may, despite all our attempts to set the record straight we are still frequently referred to as a group from the University of Texas.

The second area of confusion is that since most of our members are of Mexican-American origin our theatre comes under the description of Teatro Chicano. In Mexico, and to a certain extent in this country this means that people expect us to perform the same kind of material other groups that identify themselves with Chicano problems do, and in a similar way. We have had to explain a great many times that while some of our performers consider themselves Chicanos others, though of similar origins, do not. The term Chicano often has a political connotation, and our members are not unified by political agreement; nor do they have plans to be. This seems particularly difficult for many Mexicans to understand, for they are accustomed to considering theatre a political vehicle of expression, and are therefore at times confounded and even disturbed by our view of ourselves. In this country too, people who are

involved with what has been called Teatro Chicano at times find it difficult to recognize the validity of our approach to theatre, on the one hand because we have Chicano actors who are employed in exploring different themes than they do, on the other hand because our actors perform usually in both Spanish and English rather than in the language of Chicanos.

Insofar as I was the founder of La Compañía de Teatro Bilingüe, I should clarify how this happened. My orientation was not, at least at first, caused by any great knowledge of Chicanos and their needs. I was teaching in the hills of Vermont at the time, far from any association with Chicanos and their problems. I came to Texas to found this program because I wished to continue the pursuit of a bicultural and bilingual life I had begun many years before when I married a girl from Mexico. I was sure that somewhere in the United States a theatre group dealing with Spanish as well as English, and with themes Latin America held in common with the United States, would exist. I was shocked to discover that if I wished to become involved with such an enterprise I would have to create it myself.

If the first impetus for creation of La Compañía de Teatro Bilingüe was my own personal need, the main reason behind the formation of this group was different. It was formed because the Department of Theatre at Texas A&I University, under the chairmanship of Dr. Randall J. Buchanan, decided to face up realistically to the needs of the communities it serviced. It was felt that if the communities of South Texas could recognize their commonality of two heritages, the Spanish and the English linguistically and the Mexican-American and the Anglo culturally, that people in the communities would be better off than they were. We felt, as we do now, that such recognition could bring about many long over due reforms and could bring about a cultural renaissance in South Texas.

So, if our primary considerations were not political, they were very strongly social. We were obliged by our viewpoint to come to many realizations:

1. That the present largely held description of local theatre groups of amateurs as "Community Theatre" did not include the Mexican American in a concept of community.
2. That "community theatre" largely dealt with the needs of a well-to-do middle class of Anglos interested in associating itself primarily with warmed-over and often rancid Broadway, and had no interest in addressing itself with most of the community's cultural, esthetic and social needs.
3. That to interest Mexican Americans in theatre they would have in common with Anglos it would be necessary to overhaul the myths and legends at the basis of so-called American theatre.
4. We would have to deal with the fact that until recently Mexican Americans were disuaded from any kind of public expression in Spanish, and with the various axioms of this theorem, such as that dramatic education in this country had to be in English, that dramatic expression was for those who spoke English, and that Mexican Americans were by definition inferior because instead of speaking one language they spoke two. We had to recognize too that the Mexican American acting student was convinced often through a lifetime of brainwashing that somehow an Anglo whose accent was redolent of hamfat and biscuits was a superior actor to one who was raised on tortillas.
5. We had to broaden our horizons as to where to find acceptable scripts.

It should be obvious from the above description that while we were not oriented in the direction of political expression we felt a great debt to Teatro Chicano, for Teatro Chicano was the first to bypass the rigidities of an Anglo-dominated art. It was Teatro Chicano, and not La Compañía de Teatro Bilingüe, that made the Chicano aware that he had a right to theatrical expression even if he did not have the means to afford all the niceties of traditional theatre. I am sure that in some ways it was the pressure of Teatro Chicano and of other political movements that made it conceivable for La Compañía de Teatro Bilingue to become enfranchised. To this day our membership is strong in affection for Teatro Chicano and we hope for its success in every way. We, nevertheless, are committed to a different view, one which is at the same time based in traditional dramatic literatures and techniques, and yet looks to new means and methods of dramatic expression. Our purpose is to carry traditional dramatic and linguistic forms a step farther than they have been - to include the people of South Texas.

At the center of our orientation is our university's purpose, which is to provide a thorough education in the dramatic arts for people who will be concerned with various aspects of those arts either vocationally or avocationally. We try to train actors, teachers, knowledgeable citizens. We expose our students to as many kinds of theatrical experience as we can, and try to make them aware of more options than they could ever hope to exercise in the course of a college education.

Our first orientation was towards Latin American dramatic literature for a number of reasons. First, I felt that Latin American drama, represented by a considerable number of first rate playwrights, dealt with concerns of interest to Mexican Americans. Second, I felt that the introduction of a new dramatic

literature which included not only characters familiar to Mexican Americans but ways of expression for which they have an afinity would give actors an impetus to participate and audiences an impetus to attend.

While this proved to be somewhat so, and at least seemed to have the result of opening theatre up for Mexican American students, it was to turn out to be a step in a long odyssey to find the best kind of drama for the citizenry of South Texas.

The search for new forms and ways to say what needs to be said, and to say better what is being said, has characterized Teatro Bilingüe over the past seven years. Our first efforts were in Spanish. From there we moved on to performing with the same actors in both languages, hoping to make similar productions in each language available to monolingual audiences. Shortly later, while continuing to perform in both languages we experimented with Story Theatre, taking a story written by a Mexican American and trying through narration in both languages and strong reliance on pantomime and dance to create a form viable for more audiences. This experiment led to children's theatre. We ventured into children's theatre because we felt that the elementary grades was the best place to begin to break down the barriers between the cultures. This viewpoint led us to experiment with something we now feel we do successfully, simultaneous narration in both languages through a method we call interlocking narration, where the narrator in one language always seems to be supporting the other.

Simultaneous bilingual theatre for children continues to be an important part of our program. We have expanded it to include workshops for elementary grade teachers as well as tours. We hope soon to form a professional company which will include these plays in its repertory.

It suggested more experimentation with the story theatre form, with the result that we became involved with adult stories written by Mexicans and Mexican Americans. At first we began with stories told only in Spanish, but then added some in English and eventually in a mixture. We expect to do a good deal more with this medium and are encouraging local story tellers to submit manuscripts relating to Chicano life.

Recently we have become involved in two ventures - multi-media as a way to enhance intercultural communication, and the brechtian technique of having an actor play many parts in a play at different times in order to arrive at a deep understanding of the role he will perform. Our use of this technique however was to permit an actor to play one role in English and a different one in Spanish. The actors seem to feel this helps them understand roles better.

Our search for means of involving both cultures brought us to several considerations besides what audiences want and how we can involve them. We became concerned with what we thought audiences <u>should</u> want. For example, I personally was distressed with the fact that so many of our myths and legends seem to be in the saccharine hands of the Walt Disney studios. One of the important things about myths and legends ought to be the assessment of life in its unpleasant as well as its pleasant connotations, and I felt that in the area of children's stories this was lacking. Accordingly, I looked for stories Mexican American children could relate to as in some way explaining their own lives, and hoped that if I found them they would interest Anglo children too. The result was two stories we adapted for simultaneous bilingual production, <u>El gato sin amigos/The cat who had no friends</u>, a Cuban story, and <u>La rana Juana/Jeanie the frog</u>, a Mexican tale. <u>Gato</u> dealt with the assessment of work and play, and <u>Rana</u> dealt with he who has the last laugh. These plays have had appeal

for children of all backgrounds and linguistic groupings. We have begun to adapt others on their model. We are also now considering dealing with myths and legends on the adult level as part of our attempt to create awareness that there is more to American life than can be implied from many current myths.

The formation of La Compañía de Teatro Bilingüe has been rewarding for us. We have found a large ready audience both in the United States and in Mexico. Our actors, because of their work in both languages, have achieved a level of proficiency in each language we would like to think surpasses what they would have achieved had they worked in only one language. This difference we attribute to our rehearsal technique, whereby an actor reexamines his role ror rehearsal in the second language when he has gotten it to dress rehearsal readiness in the first. By this means he reassesses his characterization and his imagery with the result that he arrives at more depth than if he had merely assumed he knew his part in the first language and let it go at that. It can be argued that actors who are proficient in their craft should undertake such reexamination even if they work only in one language - but few do. And even those who do are not afforded the comparison possibilities that appraisal of linguistic differences provides.

The actors themselves have benefitted from cultural exposures they had lacked before entering into this venture. They have not tended to lose their identity as Mexican Americans through considerable exposure to Mexico. On the contrary, this exposure usually seems to result in greater self-confidence from the knowledge that they are the products of two great and important cultures. Many of them, now ready for the professional stage, seem to want to continue with Bilingual theatre and make it a life's work.

Of course among the benefits we must mention the increased status of actors who have proved their talent in both languages. Where they used to feel submissive or defensive in the presence of good Anglo talent, they now often take the lead, and at times it is the Anglo actor who begins to wish he were bilingual. More and more Anglos have been cast in our productions.

In one small area we have proved what should not need to be proved - that far from being inferior to Anglos, the Mexican Americans can boast considerable talent and a great capacity to succeed. That in itself ought to be good enough to explode a myth or two.

Another increment has been that we have been one of the theatre groups who have brought good Latin American drama to the awareness of the American public. We are among those who are making it possible to have a strong theatrical exchange with Latin America in our universities and communities.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON SOME MYTHS PERTAINING TO THEATRE

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This paper deals with my experiences and observations, as director of La Compania de Teatro Bilingue, regarding certain myths in American Theatre.

In 1906 Langdon Mitchell presented THE NEW YORK IDEA. This play introduced a new element into American, and for that matter European Drama. This new element was that Mitchell asked the playgoer to experience the workings of a Negro maid who was actually drawn as a human being, rather than as a stage stereotype of racial and ethnic traits based upon certain biological and psychological absurdities. From that moment on a slow but steady progression of awarenesses has developed in the theatre, to the extent that eventually Blacks, Irishmen, Jews, and finally even women were dealt with as if they were human beings. One of the last batch of humans to be afforded this consideration, was the Mexican American. As recently as the national convention of the American Theatre Association in Los Angeles in 1976 a playwright attested that he felt incapable of characterizing Mexican Americans in his scripts, even though he was raised among them, because his hardest efforts to create human characters all seemed to come out tacos and chili con frijoles. It startled that playwright that he had all his life seen a large number of his fellow men as being somewhat less than human. And it startled his listeners that he was honest enough to admit his prejudices to himself and to them.

I will mention three sets of experiences and observations of Mexican Americans in relation to theatre.

The first has to do with the image of the Mexican-American actor, both as seen by himself and by others.

One of the main areas in which universities have opened the door to Mexican Americans in recent years has been in bilingual education degrees. The term bilingual in this context is perhaps confusing, for a literal application of it would imply that education in two languages and cultures is attempted. Sometimes this is what happens, but often what is meant by bilingual education is the encouragement of non-English speaking people to learn to assimilate into English-speaking society, but not of English speaking people to assimilate into non-English speaking society. English-speaking equates in these cases with "americanization". This is the concept that dominates in the Texas elementary schools and in the federal laws creating bilingual programs. And this observation brings us to theatre, for theatre deals with man's pursuit of adjustment to social and metaphysical situations.

The Mexican American young actors I have encountered since 1972, when I began to work with them, mostly seemed to fit into the following pattern: He moved in two languages and in two cultures had been indoctrinated from early youth with the notion that he was inferior to someone who moved in only one language or culture, if that one were English. He who was the son of a porter or of an itinerant farm hand was inferior to his employers and the families and friends of his employers. He had trouble advancing in the lower grades of school because he was "backward" by definition, and by backward was meant that he could not easily adjust to the fact that his superior teacher probably could not speak Spanish and considered it criminal to try to communicate in that language.

Drama was a property of those who spoke the English Language. So-called folk drama did not deal with his folk. The idea of "community" theatre he encountered did not include his people in a definition of community. The play, OUR TOWN had very little to do with his town. The kind of acting that had to be done did not call for characters and events relevant to his life.

However invalid some of these notions may seem, many Mexican Americans accepted that they were by definition inferior to Anglos. Relatively few of them tried to work in theatre, and if they did try, they found themselves, more often than not, cast as Latin and Indian stereotypes. Whether they played "good guys" or, more often, "bad guys" they were usually used in syntax to the rightness of Anglo ways. In colleges and universities as well as in the professional theatre, they were often relegated to such roles. Type casting usually excluded them from considerations for parts which called for characters in the Anglo main-stream of life. Somehow it was more incongruous for a swarthy Mexican American, for example, to play a British nobleman, than for an Anglo whose intonations resounded hominy grits and chittlings to do so.

Type casting was not the only element that kept Mexican Americans down from aspiring as actors. Many were not as much at home with the complexities of the English Language as some Anglo actors, and did not get the exposure to roles necessary to remedy this failing. Too, many of the Mexican Americans, being of poor families, felt less competent by experience and background, to deal with middle class and upper class types in theatre than their Anglo competitors did.

It would be pleasant to say that with the founding of La Compania de Teatro Bilingue at Texas A&I University all this suddenly changed. It didn't. There are still a great many universities and professional and community theatres where the Pancho Lopez stereotypes are given to swarthy people whose only other requisites seem to be a mispronunciation of English, in any of a number of directions, and an expressiveness of either sinister or benign stupidity. There are still a large number of Mexican American students of theatre who feel frustrated and inhibited about opportunities, and a great many who accept that the way out is anglification. Nevertheless certain progress can be reported.

In its second year of existence La Compania de Teatro Bilingue presented plays in both Spanish and English, using the same actors for both languages. Descriptions of rehearsals problems can be found in my article entitled Rehearsal Problems in Bilingual Theatre in the May 1978 issue of the Latin American Theatre Review published at the University of Kansas.

Certain observations resulted:

1. It was found in rehearsal that many Mexican American actors have limited vocabularies in both Spanish and English. Through performance vocabularies in both languages improved rapidly.

2. Working in two languages seemed to make for better performance in each language than if the actor had worked in only one. We attributed this difference to the reexamination of the playscripts that occurred when moving from one language into the other. Reexamination seemed to create clearer and more cogent imagery.

3. Mexican Americans, exposed to playing a large variety of roles, exhibited considerable competence.

4. Having played a large variety of roles well, and having been recognized for their ability to do so, Mexican-American actors were suddenly in demand locally in English Speaking theatre.

5. The self-image of the actors shot up spectacularly.

6. The standing of Mexican American actors in the community changed greatly, for they were looked upon as successful in a difficult art and capable of doing something in that art that monolingual actors had not achieved. Indeed, because they had learned how to work for exceptional image-making, they were recognized as unusually well-prepared in their field.

Demonstrating a suddenly distinct advantage over monolingual actors, the Mexican American actors obliged a rethinking of the advantages versus the disadvantages of bilingual and bicultural involvement, and a rethinking of factors that went into opinions of prestige. Many of those who had been limited to the use of only one language demonstrated, for the first time, their discomfort with the awareness that they were not really superior to those who could manage both, and as a result began to reevaluate the myths with which they were raised. Evidence can be supplied that the destruction of the myth of anglo superiority has not always been accepted amicably.

A second set of experiences has to do with the presentation of plays that deal with social conditions meaningful to Mexican Americans and other non-Anglo publics.

When La Compania de Teatro Bilingue was formed it ventured into the presentation of plays the scripts of which were written by Latin Americans as one means of creating drama meaningful to all South Texans. It was surprising to observe that there were a great many very competent Latin American playwrights who were virtually unknown outside of language departments in the United States, and whose works were not handled by the script publishing houses.

One of these scripts was HISTORIAS PARA SER CONTADAS by Osvaldo Dragun. Performances of this play in both Spanish and English may be termed successful from a number of viewpoints. We have been performing it for six years, and it is still in demand. In 1977 it was selected to open the American College Theatre Festival at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

It is a play along allegorical lines dealing with three simple stories. The first concerns the desperation of a sick man who needs to sell on a street corner in order to fight starvation; the second deals with the extent to which a man will espouse even racial prejudice in order to survive, and the third treats the extremes of unemployment.

This play has been received in two distinctly different ways. Mexicans in Mexico, Mexican Americans, Blacks, and others of similar experiential backgrounds, have tended to tune into this play with strong emotions experiencing it as an allegory dealing with realities of their lives. Many of them have had to face solutions to problems of survival in ways not very far from those accepted by the characters - for example, a man who is unemployed having to resort to finding a job as a watch dog seems like a slightly humorous extension of ugly realities they have met in their lives, and that was how they received it.

The reaction among Anglos, especially of the middle class, was usually different While many Anglos liked performances, their experiential backgrounds usually were removed from the options about behavioral choices made by characters in the play. They could logically ask, referring to a land where social security unemployment relief is a reality, and where most of them had never had to face extreme starvation nor severe privations of other kinds, if the characters did not perhaps have other options for behavioral choices than those that were used. So, while many Anglos sympathized with the characters, rarely was a strong empathic response elicited, and usually some element of reservation about agitprop would enter into comments.

In the presentation of another play by a Latin American we encountered similar differences of experiential observation.

To put it strongly, we were not surprised that in Manzanillo when we performed HISTORIAS in a town plaza old fishermen wept tears induced by the recalling of sorrowful memories, and we were not surprised when Washington critics who seemed to like the show made it apparent that we were dealing with unpleasant things outside their experiences. This difference between cultural understandings of insular Anglo members of a middle class and just about all of the rest of the world reaches far beyond theatre, of course. Theatrically it points to the limited scope of our myths and of our concepts of "universality" on the American stage, and it suggests a closer scrutiny of what many people in the world have to deal with as realities. The simple truism that golden opportunity is neither equally golden nor equally opportune for all, even in the United States, deserves more attention than many current myths and legends seem to have given it.

A third set of experiences tends to modify the first two somewhat. It resulted from Teatro Bilingue's decision to enter into the field of children's theatre.

We entered into this field because we felt that if we were to create a public interested in bicultural and bilingual theatre we would have to begin with the primary school children. Insofar as existing stories in English were already abundant we decided to look into stories and myths not well known in this country, or even unknown, that came out of the Latin American heritage. Because we wanted these stories to enrich the lives of Mexican American children, Anglos and Blacks, so that they could find a commonality in the theatrical experience, we developed our scripts in simultaneous use of Spanish and English through a technique of narration which made it possible to follow the action completely in one language and to notice similarities and differences in the other language.

We have been practising this kind of theatre successfully now for three years. By success I mean that we have performed bilingually for mixed groups and for monolingual publics, and the children have always participated enthusiastically. Occasionally a teacher would look at the proceedings with traces of consternation, for it seemed to upset her notions of law-and-established-order; but the children seemed willing to accept new experiences. Indeed, they seemed hungry for them.

The experiences we have noticed have led to the observation that myths, especially those dealing with social or economic status, are hard to change or modify if one tries to do this with adults. Children seem to have fewer problems making the shift.